

## **(Forced) Walks on the Wild Side: Precarious Borders in American Captivity Narratives<sup>1</sup>**

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Captivity narratives are often regarded as the first genuinely American literary genre. From the origins in the British Barbary captivity narratives of the 16th and 17th centuries, through the classical accounts of Native American captivity that were composed by New England Puritans during the American Indian Wars at the end of the 17th century, up to more recent examples of abduction memoirs, these texts show individuals who are carried into foreign environments against their will. Often enough, their responses to nature are dominated by unfavorable rhetoric and general revulsion. As opposed to the genres of travel writing and natural history, nature in the captivity narrative is usually a space of suffering, a "vast and desolate [w]ilderness" (Rowlandson 71). Cold, rain, and winds strain the captives' health, while rocks, rivers, and trees constantly scratch and tear at their extremities. Yet, this unsympathetic rendering of the wild should not discourage ecocritics, as Michael Branch has repeatedly urged with regard to early American writing.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the ongoing project within ecocriticism to sound the literary landscape for emerging nature discourses that transport positive environmentalist ideas, we also need to interrogate those bodies of texts that deal with nature only implicitly or exhibit a directly antagonistic attitude toward nature.<sup>3</sup>

In the past, American captivity accounts have largely been read with regard to their religious significances, their inter-ethnic implications, and their depiction of gender.<sup>4</sup> Previous scholarship has also firmly appropriated this colonial genre

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is a revised and extended version of a paper delivered at the conference "New Grounds: Ecocriticism, Globalization and Cultural Memory" at Radboud University Nijmegen on January 13, 2010. I want to thank Serenella Iovino for her feedback and Daniel Stein for helpful comments on the manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Branch, "Saving" and "Before." Branch lists a number of reasons why early American writing has not been granted much ecocritical attention. Among these are (1) the narrow definition of nature writing as a personal, non-fiction account with increased attention to the environment; (2) early American authors' reliance on anthropocentric and religious ideologies that are diametrically opposed to mainstream ecocritical sensibilities; (3) the pre-national status of colonial writing, which undercuts the narrative of "American" nature writing (Branch, "Before" 92).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Grewe-Volpp, who holds that "[i]n order to become a tool for a literary analysis, however, ecocriticism must go beyond criteria of 'right' or 'wrong,' of advocating a green politics or of articulating normative philosophies" (84).

<sup>4</sup> The most comprehensive survey of the captivity genre is still Derounian-Stodola and Levernier. The authors only marginally address the environmental aspects of their large sample of narratives. Good examples showing the prevalence of the analytical categories race and gender in more recent studies of Indian captivity are Namias, Castiglia, and Little.

into US-American national literature.<sup>5</sup> Given the predominant theoretical currents within literary and cultural studies, this trajectory is by no means surprising. Yet, I will argue in the following that aside from its national and intercultural relevance, the captivity genre's unifying plot revolves around the confrontation with the environment and the unsettling forces of wilderness and animality. These confrontations spur the narrating subjects into painful reconsiderations of borders—both geographically and physically.

By unhinging identity markers like 'nationality' or 'humanity,' such narratives are vehicles for an expression of sentiments that is peculiarly adaptable to current reconsiderations of ecocritical theories, such as ecoglobalism (Buell) or eco-cosmopolitanism (Heise).<sup>6</sup> Within this recent ecocritical shift toward the planetary scale, it appears to be a shared notion that the alluring power of categories like "place" and "nation"—as in both nationalistic policy and in the study of national literatures—will ultimately fail to address the ramifications of global environmental crisis. Neither are essentialist conceptions of space, such as country vs. city or wilderness vs. civilization, seen as helpful anymore to represent and explain the manifold interpenetrations of the human and the non-human realms. The following thus presents a diachronic reading of captivity narratives that highlights the genre's preoccupation with border crossings and displacement. I argue that even the 17th- and 18th-century texts—while far from containing direct ecoglobalist insights—do render an open and adaptive sense of place brought about by the involuntary experience of liminality and interconnection. Through close readings of personal memoirs, we might come to re-appreciate the Emersonian dictum that "the near explains the far" (Emerson 1146). The path toward "new forms of culture that are no longer anchored in place" (Heise 10) might unexpectedly turn out to require a journey inward, toward the natural embeddedness and embodiedness of each human being.

Analyzing a genre that has existed for a number of centuries based on these emergent ecocritical notions will undeniably turn out to be problematic. After all, Heise derives her approach from very recent scholarship in cultural theory, which largely relies on postmodern experiences of globalization, international mobility, and environmental crisis. Yet, her definition of the eco-cosmopolitan project opens some promising avenues for the study of captivity narratives: "Eco-cosmopolitanism [...] reaches toward what some environmental writers and philosophers have called the 'more-than-human world'—the realm of nonhuman species, but also that of connectedness with both animate and inanimate networks

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<sup>5</sup> A good example of this appropriation is Richard VanDerBeets' *The Indian Captivity Narrative: an American Genre*.

<sup>6</sup> Scott Slovic has made a succinct attempt at grasping this new current in ecocritical scholarship in the previous issue of this journal. The distinguishing feature that unites the various strands of "third-wave ecocriticism," as he terms it, is their tendency to cross established boundaries between nations and ethnic groups, and between humans and animals. Cf. Slovic, esp. 7-8.

of influence and exchange" (Heise 60-61). From this point of departure, Heise then seeks out various American and German cultural artifacts, which transport a message akin to her theoretical outline. With the captivity genre, one has to probe a lot deeper to get at the core of meaning that resonates with global environmentalism.

As a first step to recognizing the value of this genre for recent debates in ecocriticism, one needs to be aware that processes like globalization and deterritorialization are by no means unique to the 20th or 21st centuries. Current scholarship increasingly re-conceptualizes the early modern period as the first era of truly global interactions. The religious and cultural historian Charles H. Parker has recently published a superb history of globalization starting in the 15th century. He holds:

The emergence of powerful empires around the world set in motion processes of exchange that reached across all continents except Antarctica. Empire building in this period established four central forms of interaction: new commercial exchange networks, largescale migration streams, worldwide biological exchanges, and transfers of knowledge across oceans and continents. This was a period in world history characterized by intense cultural, political, military, and economic contact, yet all this interaction was not the story of one region dominating all the rest. Rather a host of individuals, companies, tribes, states, and empires clashed and competed – but also cooperated with one another – bringing regions of the world into sustained contact and leading ultimately to the integration of global space. (3)

Previously local events increasingly entailed global effects, e.g. when the scarcity of wood in England in the 1500s fueled the search for natural resources during the colonial exploration of North America; deforestation on the Atlantic seaboard was a logical consequence (Parker 162-163). Furthermore, emigrants like the New England Puritans had first-hand experience of the process of deterritorialization—the detachment of cultural practices from a specific place (Heise 55)—in their attempt to transplant their way of life into remote corners of the world. For colonists in captivity, this deterritorialization was even doubled, as they were forcibly extracted from their new abodes. Contemporary captives in globalized conflicts such as the Iraq War similarly suffer from being twice-removed, first, from their country of origin, secondly, from their small pockets of military stability into the unknown territory of the 'enemy'.

The following readings thus focus on a much neglected core aspect of captivity narratives: the confrontation of individuals with natural spaces and the ensuing re-evaluations of their pre-existing notions of boundaries. Narratives of captives forced to face the contingency of their bodily existence and the worthlessness of human borders vis-à-vis bioregions may function as a transforming shock for the reader; they lay bare the precarious position of every perceiving subject between nature and culture, between human and animal.

Although cultural and historical specificities are vital to understanding each text, we should not let them block out the universal significances of the genre.<sup>7</sup>

While my observations are firmly tied to the American tradition of captivity narratives, the texts discussed in the following are clear examples of the transcendence of national frames of reference. In the first larger section, I discuss the environmental subtext of two Puritan captivity narratives. Even though an American nation did not yet exist at their time of publication, more or less stable frames of a quasi-national geography existed due to the colonial settlements in New England and New France. The second section contains readings of two recent memoirs in which Americans recreate the archetypal captivity plot in the desert of Iraq and the jungle of Columbia, respectively. While the older narratives are situated in a contested colonial space, the latter two go far beyond the borders of the United States, thus mirroring American involvement in global conflicts. Both sections pay specific attention to the theme of animality and to the motif of rivers, which form a universal environmental boundary more commanding than imagined borders.

### **Early American Captivities**

Originating in the late 17th century and peaking in popularity about 100 years later, American narratives of Indian<sup>8</sup> captivity form one of the most popular literary modes of expression in the British colonies and the early Republic. In the 1680s, the best-selling books printed in New England were the captivity narratives by Mary Rowlandson and the minister John Williams, trumped only by the Bible (Derounian-Stodola and Levernier 14-15; Slotkin 96). While the popularity of this genre grew continually throughout the 18th century, the overall style became increasingly sensationalist. The early texts, however, largely adhered to the orthodox Puritan discourse that dominated the small public sphere of colonial New England.<sup>9</sup> We can assume that the landscapes and settings sketched in these widely read books reflected and also shaped the colonists'—or at least the colonial elite's—perception of their surroundings. Through the wilderness experience, artificial boundaries lose importance, while natural locations gain increased attention, as the following analysis of the river motif will show.

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<sup>7</sup> By 'universal', I mean those parts of text which may be grasped even by readers who do not possess the specific socio-cultural or historical knowledge to decode all of the implied messages. Thus, a contemporary reader from Germany might at first not fully grasp the components of Puritan doctrine encoded in Mary Rowlandson's narrative. Yet, he or she will be able to understand her reports of physical pain and envision basic settings such as rivers or mountains. In such universal aspects of texts lies significant potential, I would argue, for a transcultural understanding of human embeddedness that is remarkably stable through space and time.

<sup>8</sup> For the remainder of this essay, members of the Native American tribes that lived in the area of today's New England states and Southern Canada will be called 'Indians.' This historical usage of the term is intended to facilitate references to the primary texts.

<sup>9</sup> For an extended discussion of the transformation of the American public sphere brought about by the Great Awakening in the early 18th century see Kelleter, esp. 289-310.

For any account of the American captivity narrative, it is imperative to address the canonized text *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* by Mary Rowlandson about her time as a prisoner of an Algonquian tribe in Massachusetts during King Philip's War (1675-76). In his essay on ecoglobalism, Lawrence Buell has pointed out two divergent spatial discourses of the American colonial period that anticipate later ecoglobalist writings: "In the discourse of displacement as well as possession, the emergence of a sense of environmentality of transnational reach is inseparable from a sense of the incipient commodification of environment, exuberant in the former, troubled in the latter, in itself also potentially transnational" (Buell 238). While the impetus of possession operates in early promotional writings that surveyed the American continent for its economic value, the discourse of displacement permeates individual memoirs such as Rowlandson's text, as Buell aptly shows. In a first step on the way to a less essentialist conceptualization of borders, Rowlandson has to discard her prior identity: "All was gone, my Husband gone ... my children gone, my Relations and Friends gone, our House and home and all our comforts within door and, without, all was gone, (except my life) and I knew not but the next moment that might go too" (71). Her mental map, full of colonial preconceptions and values, is wiped clean by this displacement, a *tabula rasa* now open to be inscribed by the itinerant experience of the New England environment.

In the form of rivers, this environment begins to replace her formerly rigid notions of space. The Baquag River<sup>10</sup> has a strong structuring function for Rowlandson's travels through the New England wilderness and is a symptomatic example of the unsettling presence of nature in her spiritual narrative. In the fifth part of the narrative,<sup>11</sup> the Indians are pursued by the British army and therefore in great haste to cross the river:

They quickly fell to cutting dry trees, to make Rafts to carry them over the river: and soon my turn came to go over: By the advantage of some brush which they had laid upon the Raft to sit upon, I did not wet my foot (which many of themselves at the other end were mid-leg deep) which cannot but be acknowledged as a favour of God to my weakened body, it being a very cold time. I was not before acquainted with such kind of doings or dangers. (Rowlandson 79)

As a structural element, the river denotes a physical border much more potent than the imaginary frontier between her home and the wilderness. As Rowlandson recounts, it is this specific river that keeps the English forces from pursuing the

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<sup>10</sup> Rowlandson's spelling is inconsistent. She first calls the river "Bacquaug" (79) and later "Baquag" (94). I follow Neal Salisbury and use the latter spelling. The name of this waterway was later changed to Miller's River. It runs along the northern border of Massachusetts and joins the Connecticut River north of Greenfield, MA. Judging from the topography of her captivity, Rowlandson must have covered about 120 miles on foot during her captivity.

<sup>11</sup> Rowlandson calls these legs of the journey 'removes,' documenting her increasing distance from her home in both a spatial and a spiritual sense. For a longer discussion of these removes and the general concept of space in Rowlandson's narrative see Starre.

fleeing Indians. In her description, the narrator emphasizes the fact that the English army had almost caught up with the fleeing Indian party but was then kept by divine powers from crossing the river.<sup>12</sup> Apart from its spiritual dimension, the river therefore marks a natural boundary which the English seem unable to cross.

The fascination with the destructive power of the river emanates from the following passage in which Rowlandson re-crosses the Baquag River:

[...] the water was up to the knees, and the stream very swift and so cold that I thought it would have cut me in sunder. I was so weak and feeble, that I reeled as I went along, and thought there I must end my days at last, after my bearing and getting through so many difficulties [...]. (94)

As it turns out, however, the transgression of this border is the final ordeal that she has to go through before being released. Impressed by the manifest presence of the river, Mitchell Breitwieser has asserted that this motif is the most important feature of the text: "Of the uncountable events that transpired during the captivity, none is recalled so repeatedly or so concretely, or with such a recurrent imagistic gestalt (river-weariness-legs) as crossing waters" (76). The symbolism attached to rivers in Rowlandson's narrative reflects her heightened awareness of the surrounding natural settings. Mary Rowlandson's river has an array of different connotations: it is a physical and spiritual borderline; an obstacle, but also a site where the subject can prove its endurance; a privileged site of God's workings; and a structural device for the plot. The unsettling effect of the river thus complicates Lawrence Buell's notion that the empirical New England wilderness has no value to Mary Rowlandson, as she does not "assign any significance to the forest except as an antiplace" (237). As we have seen in the previous passages, the narrator can hardly keep in check the potent presence of cold and raging bodies of water that only faintly resemble the biblical rivers of Babylon. Even though her representation of rivers is anything but a pastoral idyll, one may still observe how this elemental site humbles and reorients the narrating subject.

Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative is often taken as the metonymical representative of the whole American captivity tradition. Admittedly, there are few other texts of the genre rivaling her carefully constructed salvation plot and her dense, yet unadorned symbolism. However, we should not overlook the traces of a different, much more diverse nature discourse in other texts of the time. A case in point is the lesser-known, but no less fascinating text *Memoirs of Odd Adventures and Strange Deliverances* by John Gyles who was abducted from his home in Maine during King William's War in 1689. His captivity occurred at a relatively young age and spans across a much longer period of almost ten years. His narrative bespeaks a genuine interest in the colonial environment. Here, rivers often order the path of the journey:

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Rowlandson 80.

And when the spring came on and the rivers broke up, we moved back to the head of St. John's River, and there made canoes of moosehides [...] Then we went down the river to a place called Madawescok [...] and went farther down the river till we came to the greatest falls in these parts, called Checanekepeag, where we carried a little way over the land, and putting off our canoes, we went downstream still. (Gyles 104)

The waterways appear as routes of transportation, less a boundary than a unifying agency that connects different places. Gyles's captivity travels extend his sense of place as he follows rivers through British New England, Indian territories, and French Canada. It is no surprise, then, that he afterwards became a migratory frontiersman, exploring the New England hinterlands, and later even served as an official interpreter between colonial government officials and Indian tribes.

Gyles's narrative furthermore features the river in a function which is not sketched out in Rowlandson's: a potential source of food. Due to the length of his captivity, Gyles was able to witness the regular flow of the seasons much better than other short-term captives. On numerous occasions, he mentions that he went fishing with his captors. His descriptions of fishing trips blend seamlessly into the remarkable account of the flora and fauna of northern New England and southern Canada (Gyles 116-120). Here, he portrays the Saint John's River, which in part formed the border between British and French settlements, as an ecosystem teeming with wildlife. His experience of the rivers in the summer adds new shades to the bleak, cold picture drawn by Rowlandson.

As this brief sketch has shown, rivers order and determine the topography of early American captivities in multiple ways.<sup>13</sup> While the captives' narrativization of rivers is obviously a cultural construction, the wilderness experience that underlies its genesis foregrounds the dependence of texts on the environment. In this light, early American narratives appear as much more relevant to the present as this ecological "principle of reciprocity" (Grewe-Volpp 81) is stable throughout space and time.

A further field in which we can discern the instability of borders within the captive experience is the precarious interrelationship between humans and animals. In Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, the topic of animality first comes into play via the Indians who took her hostage. In the initial chapter, the narrator depicts the grisly scene she witnessed before being carried off: "It is a solemn sight to see so many Christians lying in their blood, some here, and some there, like a company of Sheep torn by Wolves. All of them stript naked

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<sup>13</sup> I cannot do justice here to other significant places that deserve close attention in early captivity narratives. The most prevalent locales would include mountains, woods, and swamps, each of which demands different types of adjustment by the itinerant captive. William Cronon's environmental history of the colonial ecosystems of New England can serve as a helpful complimentary reading to early American captivity narratives with regard to their contemporaneous ecological context.

by a company of hell-hounds, roaring, singing, ranting and insulting, as if they would have torn our very hearts out [...]" (70). When the narrator states that the English were "stript naked" by the "hell-hounds" (70), it is not immediately clear whether she remains on the metaphorical level or describes an actual observation. Within the metaphor, this might refer to the wolves stripping the skin off sheep. However, it might also indicate that the Indians took the clothes of the dead and dying English. The Indians would thereby deprive the colonists of their civilized status and transform them into animals. The vestments of civilization appear as a shield not only from the looks of other people but most importantly as a defense against nature. As Erica Fudge, one of the leading scholars in the field of animal studies, has pointed out, the binary distinction between human and animal is historically contingent and has to be constantly created and reinforced both by discourse and practice: "Achieving human status has never been easy. The ways in which being human is defined rely on the exercise of certain skills, such as speaking, and in the exercise of human-ness the animal becomes an important player in history. It becomes the thing which the human is constantly setting itself against" (1).<sup>14</sup> The perceived border between the animal world and the human appears to be porous enough under everyday conditions; yet, the captivity experience pushes the perceiving subjects to the brink of this dividing line.

Rowlandson's forced marches through the cold New England landscape—her captivity lasted from February to April—take a large toll on her physical and mental state: "My head was light and dizzy (either through hunger or hard lodging, or trouble or all together), my knees feeble, my body raw by sitting double night and day, [...]" (78). The primitive powers of hunger and cold force Rowlandson to reconsider the physicality of her bodily existence. Despite clinging to her Bible and attempting to subdue any natural urges, her extreme hunger constantly threatens to overpower her. Even with the pious tone of her narrative, the reader gets the impression that it is not so much death that she fears, but becoming animal. She complains that she has to sleep on the ground "like a swine" (Rowlandson 90) and describes her recurrent hunger as "[w]olvish" (93). At one point, Rowlandson even takes a certain pride in the fact that she has overcome her civilized aversion against eating 'wild' food like groundnuts, acorns, or bear meat (79). She thus slowly comes to acknowledge the essential naturalness of her existence. In the context of a Puritan conversion plot—which Rowlandson's memoir incorporates—, this experience of one's own limitations is often called "humiliation". It is a stage on the way to eventual redemption, during which, according to Edmund Morgan, "the individual perceive[s] his helpless and hopeless condition and despair[s] of

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<sup>14</sup> Cary Wolfe, one of the central figures in American animal studies, has also recently pointed out the imperative to pursue animal studies to its ultimate end, i.e. back to the human: "It is a matter, then, of locating the animal of animal studies and its challenge to humanist modes of reading, interpretation, and critical thought not just 'out there,' among the birds and beasts, but 'in here' as well, at the heart of this thing we call human" ("Human" 572).



salvation" (68). Allegorical readings that accordingly liken her physical hunger to her spiritual state are helpful in understanding her narrative as an example of such a conversion plot (Derounian-Stodola and Levernier 107). Yet, the unstable proximity of human and animal forms a disconcerting subtext—one which transcends her cultural context and speaks to most basic concerns of natural embodiedness. Rowlandson is not only "humiliated" in regard to her own sinfulness; she is also humbled vis-à-vis her contingent position within a larger ecosystem.

Animality is rendered somewhat differently in John Gyles's narrative, although his bodily integrity is likewise compromised. During a longer march in the winter, Gyles cannot keep his feet from freezing and thus sustains horrific injuries: "Soon after, the skin came off my feet from my ankles whole, like a shoe, and left my toes naked without a nail and the ends of my great toe bones bare which, in little time turned black so that I was obliged to cut the first joint off with my knife" (110). At this point, the Indians have little hope for his survival, but Gyles recounts his unlikely healing process with the fascination and precision of a natural scientist. The narrator worries little about the loss of control over his body and marvels at the capacity of a balsam made of fir resin to alleviate the inflammation.

His acceptance of the animal forces that control his existence shapes his outlook on the non-human world as well, as the following brief anecdote demonstrates:

I was once traveling a little way behind several Indians and heard them laughing very merrily. When I came to them, they showed me the track of a moose and how a wolverine had climbed a tree, [it] had broke the wolverine's hold and torn him off, and by his track in the snow he went off another way with short steps, as if he had been stunned with the blow. The Indians who impute such accidents to the cunning of the creature were wonderfully pleased that the moose should thus outwit the mischievous wolverine. (118)

In this instance, the colonist's supposed superiority derived from his ability to read and write is questioned by the Indians' mastery of another form of signs. They are able to deduct an intriguing story from a few tracks in the snow. Far from dismissing them as wild and uncivilized, Gyles instead appears to envy their ability to encounter animals with genuine and proficient interest. The narrator also seems to accept the concepts of "cunning" and "outwitting" with regard to the animals. Instead of ridiculing the Indians, Gyles taps into their knowledge to compose his longer chapter on the most common animals of the region. We might speculate that a text like Gyles's would find a warmer reception nowadays since green topics have become commonplace. When it was published in the early 17th century, it could not effectively counter the anti-nature rhetoric of other narratives like Rowlandson's since it failed to reach a large readership.

## American Captives in Global Conflicts

The Indian Wars at the turn of the 17th century already possessed some features of globalized conflict, as British and French colonial outposts entered various war coalitions with local tribes. Rowlandson's narrative even found a transatlantic audience—a London edition was published in the same year as the first Boston edition.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the genre has still mostly been read as firmly anchored on the American continent. The past few decades have obliterated this notion. The capture of Americans in remote undeveloped regions has become a globalized phenomenon ever since the nation turned from isolationist to interventionist. The recent shift towards asymmetrical warfare against terrorist organizations, as well as the multiple international sites of conflict in which the US is involved has led to an increased number of hostage situations in diverse localities. Often enough, surviving captives have written about their experiences, resulting in a significant number of memoirs by American captives in places like the Philippines, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Iraq that can be read in relation to the captivity genre. As much as these diverse places point toward the globalization of the genre, their truly transnational appeal lies in the way in which they continue the genre-specific narrative of place-loss and animality as described above.

One such book named *American Hostage* by the New York filmmaker Micah Garen and his wife Marie-Hélène Carleton was published in 2005. During research in Iraq in 2003, Garen and his translator were taken captive in Nasiriyah by a Shi'ite militia. Repeatedly, Garen presents himself as an animal that has lost all power of agency and has to react to outside forces. While being transported in a blindfold to his makeshift prison, the narrator resorts to the following strategy to control his fear: "With no options, I became desperate. Some animals, when confronted with a life-threatening situation and no means of escape, experience tonic immobility; they feign death. I didn't know what it would do but it couldn't hurt. I dropped my head back, held my breath, and stopped moving" (Garen and Carleton 20). The effects of hostage situations have been studied by psychologists for a long time, yet it pays to note how the loss of power is rhetorically mediated by Garen. He draws his consolation from the animal world, imitating behavior appropriate for wildlife.

In their enclosure-turned-prison, Garen and his translator Amir are spending endless dull hours with nothing but conversation to keep their minds off their miserable situation. Soon enough, their talks digress into increasingly existential territory. The prime insight that he and Amir arrive at after debating spirituality and the human condition for hours is that the different types of religion around the globe are shaped by individual societies' experience with the

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<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that in his introduction to Rowlandson's text, Neal Salisbury describes the contemporaneous English audience as "secular and cosmopolitan" (49), which underlines the global appeal of captivity memoirs.

environment. As Garen explains with recourse to Edmund Husserl, whom Amir particularly admires: " 'The Egyptians' and Mesopotamians' ideas about religion were shaped by the natural world,' I said, and then borrowing Amir's term: 'the phenomenology of their environment' (Garen and Carleton 68). He then goes on to apply this new-found theorem to their current situation:

My mind started moving more quickly, a sensation that was liberating. "What religion would we invent if we were stuck here?" I put my hand on the date palm wall, our environment. "There would be demons based on the guards, malevolent gods and ..." It was hard to imagine. We knew terror and captivity, but could there also be understanding and compassion? (Garen and Carleton 68)

The narrator derives a rather unexpected philosophical lesson from a hostage situation in the middle of an "abandoned marshy plateau hidden in a remote corner of the world," as Garen describes the place (Garen and Carleton 229). This thorough reconsideration of the relationship between mind and nature echoes the reconfigurations of the narrating subject visible in the 17th-century narratives. We witness here a moment that resonates deeply with Buell's notion of the "ecoglobalist affect", i.e. the feeling of a linkage between a "specific site and a context of planetary reach" (232). Perhaps Garen's planetary epiphany concerning the place-connectedness of religion on a global scale can be read as an implicit meta-narrative comment: Garen's narrative itself was "shaped by the natural world"; the emptiness of the landscape on the marshy plateau turned his thoughts inward to ponder the relationship between nature and culture. In captivity, the subject/object-dichotomy privileging the human over the non-human world is prone to disintegrate. The "date palm wall" suddenly dictates the sensemaking process in the narrator's mind. The implied linkage of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and other beliefs based on an experience of specific environments provides Garen with a "liberating" new meta-perspective that alleviates his sense of displacement.

A further example of the neo-captivity narrative, the 2009 memoir *Out of Captivity*, recounts the fate of the American military contractors Marc Gonsalves, Keith Stansell, and Tom Howes. These men were abducted in 2003 by the same rebels of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) who also held the Columbian politician Ingrid Betancourt hostage.<sup>16</sup> The Colombian military freed them through a carefully executed ruse in 2008.

At the beginning of their odyssey through the Colombian jungle, the three Americans still long for clear-cut spatial categories in which to situate themselves: "I'm not sure if knowing our destination and for how long we'd be marching would have made things any easier, but we asked the FARC constantly about when we were going to get 'there' and where 'there' was" (Gonsalves et al. 35). After a long and grueling march, all three men have lost their hope for rescue and have

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<sup>16</sup> Betancourt herself has written a captivity memoir titled *Even Silence Has an End: My Six Years of Captivity in the Colombian Jungle*, which was recently released by Penguin Press.

discarded their previously clear-cut identities. Each of them looks inward to construct a more flexible sense of self. Marc Gonsalves remembers: "I was in the process of undergoing a great change. If I was going to survive this, I would have to draw on resources that I wasn't completely sure I had. ... We had descended from the highest point to the lowlands, topographically and emotionally" (112). Gonsalves then embarks on a path of moral reform, yet it is striking to see how he also becomes increasingly responsive to his environment. The military contractor for example selects butterflies as his personal symbol of hope.

During their period of captivity, rivers are prime places of action, since the FARC force the three captives to travel long distances either on foot or by boat. In contrast to the jungle, which they associate with all kinds of dangers, their travels on rivers appear as more positively valued episodes. Rivers provide the captives with abundant nutrition through fishing, which alleviates their hunger so that they can focus on the natural beauty of the place: "At one point, we'd stopped to camp at a bend in the river. We were in what seemed to me to be virgin territory. This enormous elbow of river was spread out in front of us and it opened onto a vista of valleys and tree-covered hillsides that stood in row after row until they bumped up against the horizon" (Gonsalves et al. 311).<sup>17</sup> The captives lose all sense of place when they are on rivers. At one point, Keith Stansell has the distinct suspicion that the FARC use the rivers to traverse the border between Colombia and Venezuela. Yet, without a GPS system he can only note that the ecosystem in and around the river looks very much the same, regardless of the national territory (Gonzalves et al. 348-49).

The jungle setting infects the rhetoric of this narrative from the outset. After recounting their plane crash in the Columbian jungle that delivered them into the hands of the rebels, Keith Stansell describes his first night in the wilderness like this: "One of the guards [...] was sitting next to me with his girlfriend perched on his lap, and they were looking at me like I was some kind of zoo animal they'd never seen before. [...] and here we all were clustered up like a pack of monkeys" (Gonsalves et al. 31). Obviously, the captivity experience is still intricately tied to the topic of animality, even in the early 21st century. Stansell's metaphorical impulse immediately leads him to borrow from the animal realm.

The main site where the human and animal realms coalesce in these narratives is again the human body. The three Americans have to undergo similar hardships as Rowlandson and Gyles 300 years before. Extended periods of their five-year captivity consist of grueling marches through the mountainous Columbian jungle in which they crash-landed. The pain from these marches as well as the frequent and strange jungle illnesses remind the three captives of the animalistic basics of their existence. Tom Howes describes an infection called

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<sup>17</sup> From an ecofeminist perspective, it will appear remarkable that the narrator relies on the same "virgin land"-metaphor which was already used by the earliest explorers of the American continent to imbue the supposedly vacant land with attributes of the feminine. Cf. Kolodny, esp. 10-25.

*chuchorros* in grisly detail: "They were painful open sores that swelled and oozed pus. The sore was just the surface symptom. Somewhere deeper in your tissue, some kind of inflammation spread and you swelled up. It was like the wound on your skin was the cone of a volcano and that deeper inflammation was the volcano's core" (275). Without adequate medical supplies the three Americans have to rely on slow processes of sickness and healing to overcome their individual afflictions. As one can see from the tone of this passage, they shift from worry to an almost empiricist stance of observing and recording, reminiscent of John Gyles's fascination with his mutilated foot. Tom Howe's experience detaches his subjectivity from his body, which he now observes with a sense of wonder. It comes as no surprise that here again we encounter natural metaphors when the image of the volcano is connected to the swelling wound.

This rupture of the border between human and animal leads to the curious fact that in spite of all the suffering, dying, and killing that takes place on the 450 pages of the book, the most horrifying scene of torture and death happens to a monkey. In a dubious attempt at raising his soldiers' morale, one leader of the guerilla force slaughters a spider monkey:

He grabbed the monkey's right leg and began sawing at the socket of the hip. A few of us turned our back at the first blow and more did after he severed the leg. We could hear him hacking his way through flesh and sinew, the cracking of the joint. Our stomachs turned. He continued with the other leg. I turned to look, hoping the animal was out of its misery. The monkey lay on its back, eyes open, still breathing. (285)

This truly disturbing event triggers reflections in Howe's mind on many of the acts of cruelty against humans he had seen during his captivity. The torture of the animal, however, is the most stylized episode. Howe repeats the phrase "eyes open, still breathing" three times throughout the longer passage, which heightens the dramatic effect. As a result, animal torture appears as the ultimate proof of the inhumane character of the rebels.

Finally, it is hardly surprising, yet still remarkable, that each of the three captives ends his account with a prototypically pastoral image: Tom Howe basks in a hammock in the garden of his Florida home, "surrounded by orange, grapefruit, lime, lemon, and mango trees" (437); Keith Stansell embarks on a hunting trip in rural Southern Georgia, where he forfeits a good shot at a buck because he feels deeply connected to the terrain (445); and Marc Gonsalves slowly pedals his bike through a state forest, marveling at the color of maple trees (451). From the Colombian jungle, these men have brought home an acute and humbling awareness of the precarious border that separates the human from the non-human.

Whether or not we agree with Cary Wolfe that "debates in the humanities and social sciences between well-intentioned critics of racism, (hetero)sexism, classism, and all other -isms ... almost always remain locked within an unexamined framework of *speciesism*" (*Animal* 1), it appears unsatisfactory that studies of American captivity narratives have so far largely produced allegorical readings, which see nature as a mere background for socio-cultural conflicts. This is all the more disappointing as the authors' first-hand nature experience has obviously brought them to the brink of perceiving themselves as animals. With pronounced regularity, periods in captivity bring forth narrators who ponder their finitude and their interrelation to the non-human around them. I comply with Wolfe's hope that through a renewed interest in animality we may come to "a new sense of the materiality and particularity not just of the animal and its multitude of forms but also of that animal called the human" ("Human" 572).

Within the sparse, but innovative recent scholarship on the captivity genre, we find re-evaluations of early and more modern texts that strongly emphasize the themes of boundary-crossing and transgression. Christopher Castiglia unearths a tradition of dissent and empowerment in American captivity writing by women, while Michelle Burnham sees liminality and constant adaptation as decisive themes. Regarding Rowlandson, Burnham states: "[T]he captive is forced to travel for miles through the New England wilderness, to adapt not only to the landscape and to the Indians' often hurried march through it, but also to the social and ideological differences of the Algonquian culture" (Burnham 60). After having asserted the importance of the environment, however, Burnham and many others direct all their energy towards interrogating the anthropocentric categories of gender, race, and nation. Yet, the transgressive power of captivity stories equally functions to destabilize essentialist conceptions of space, animality, and the natural world.

It is the loss of control over the individual's life that sets the genre apart from travel narratives. While on the surface, this leads to a much darker outlook on the hardships of the wilderness than we find in the romantic vision of John Muir's travel accounts, the captivity narrative prepares the ground for a more thorough reconsideration of the human vis-à-vis the wild. In these personal narratives, the presence of nature functions both on a local and on a transnational level. Differences between Indian lands and colonial territory, between Iraq, Colombia, Venezuela, and the United States vanish in favor of concrete materialities. Trees, mountains, and rivers determine the geography of captivity. Captives are robbed of their subjectivity in a two-fold sense: they are imprisoned objects fully reliant upon other individuals who control their every move. Furthermore, they are at the behest of nature without their accustomed cultural defenses. In a process the Puritans dubbed "humiliation," captives are thoroughly displaced and encounter the contingency of essentialist borders, be they geographic or biological. This experience lends a unique communicative position to the captive-turned-author.

Stripping away the various layers of politics, religion, and nationality, these narratives reveal a universal plot of human crisis in the face of natural materiality and animality. The American captivity narrative therefore possessed global potential even before it became globalized. A "whole-earth way of thinking and feeling about environmentality" (Buell 227) may just be close at hand wherever individuals are forced to confront their embeddedness in the non-human.

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